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ABSTRACT

The problem of maintaining quality in higher education is addressed. It is suggested that there is a need to move from "managerialism" to concern for meeting individual rather than institutional needs. Progress in management information systems and efforts to improve accountability cannot be equated with achieving educational quality. The equalizing of funds to different colleges and universities has a leveling effect on institutional quality. It is proposed that the state's investment in training an associate-level computer programmer should not be the same cost as that for a molecular physicist or lawyer. In addition, it is claimed that there is a need for using the results of educational research when making educational policy decisions. For example, in spite of evidence indicating the value of smaller and more intimate learning settings, decision-makers have chosen larger and larger campus instructional units. A minimal government role, a conscious effort to deal with educational substance, and questioning about qualitative issues concerning human accomplishment are suggested as guidelines. It is proposed that there is nothing immoral about identifying and rewarding exceptional talent, and the public belief that quality is achieved by dividing educational resources equally among all is questioned. (SW)

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THE MAINTENANCE OF ACADEMIC QUALITY IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

GEORGE W. BONHAM

Editor-in-Chief
CHANGE Magazine

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SHEEO

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George W. Bonham

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Unlike the folks you run around with, my friends are a rather simple-minded lot, and they believe almost anything I tell them. When I revealed to one of my associates that I was going out to Colorado to address a SHEEO/ECS/IEP seminar, he assumed that I was going to lecture the National War College on the strategic importance of the Cruise missile. I obviously did not wish to disappoint him, leaving his own imagination in tact, and explained that he simply couldn't understand the importance of it all.

As a magazine editor, I have of course a more than passing interest in the campaign for the use of plain English. I'm afraid that anyone now wishing to enter the labyrinthian ways of the academic must not only watch their P's and Q's, but also carry around a dictionary of the one thousand most important academic acronyms. I might tell you that I happen to represent a multiple organization called ECF/CM/CPS/CMP. (Of course NCHMS sounds really much better!) F or those not sufficiently hip on such matters, I shall explain -- but only once -- that this stands for the Educational Change Foundation-Change Magazine-Change Professional Services-Change Magazine Press, all of which obligations take far too much time for me to leave much room to spoof those who maltreat the English language.

I do not fault government employees any more on this score than others in American life. Anyone who misbehaves in my office is consigned to one month's worth of reading college news releases. It is almost an instant cure, but does give some clinical insight into this form of foot-in-mouth disease.

I remember, some time in the late sixties, when the president of Princeton University wrote a letter to the Princeton alumni. "You are probably aware," he began, "that we have been experiencing very considerable potentially explosive expressions of dissatisfaction on issues only partially related." Well, he meant that the students had given his college a bad time. I recall President Franklin Roosevelt's reaction to a 1942 government memo concerning blackouts. It said:

> Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all Federal buildings and non-Federal buildings occupied by the Federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination."

"Tell them," Roosevelt said, "that in buildings where they have to keep the work going to put something across the windows."

I think that one of the characteristics of our time is that the experts -- and you certainly belong to that elite group - tend to know more and more about less and less. Martin Trow has written elsewhere about the private and public lives of academics. My own sense of this field would tempt me to dissect the academy even further, into still smaller pieces. There are semiautonomous miniworlds in higher education, which exist pretty much within their own coteries, and touch adjacent worlds all the way from frequently to only rarely. Your world is the role of the states in the improvement and oversight of education beyond the high school. Even within your own staffs, you tend to develop further groups and subgroups. We have many such worlds in the academy, and I would hesitate to count them all. There are the worlds of student admissions, financial aid, medical and engineering education, biomedical research, university management, student personnel, fund-raising, consortia, church education

bodies, student union officers, and alumni relations. Each by now is an integral and relatively large sub world of its own. You will no doubt have noticed that I have not even referred to the scholarly societies, to faculty organizations, college athletics, or, to that most unique and most influential group of all -- Change Magazine subscribers!

This dessication of knowledge, of initiatives, and of responsibilities, is a necessary if lamentable part of modern life. We should not assume, however, that this does not interpose serious hurdles to a larger understanding of the issues, let alone the shape of the future. When I was a young man in the infantry during World War II, marching across Germany, I always assumed that my superior officers, and certainly the general in charge of my division, knew the plans and objectives of the entire campaign on the Western flank. Only much later did I learn that even they were concerned with only a limited sector of the campaign.

This growing tendency towards the expert specialist in higher education is not only an American phenomenon, though the sheer size of our own system makes this probably more necessary. Last week I returned from Sweden, which in the entire country enrolls less than 35,000 postsecondary students, and supports a teaching staff of seven thousand. And yet, what struck me in my visits with the government agency responsible for higher education was that as soon as the conversation veered from the area of one's particular responsibility, the response was, "well, I'm not quite sure about that. You'll really have to ask the so-and-so Bureau about that." What was the total government budget in all forms of higher and continuing education in Sweden, I asked? Most of the experts I interviewed at the Swedish

Board of Universities could give me no precise figures on the matter. Nor were they in any way embarrassed that they could not. One would have thought, of course, that the European approach to organizing education under one centralized ministry would avoid this kind of refraction of general knowledge about the field. But this does not seem to be the case.

Nor is it made easy in this country to have a sufficient national overview of academic matters to make the kinds of sagacious observations which would encompass the value systems and interests of the country as a whole. Nonetheless, I believe that such generalists, even if small in number, are absolutely necessary. David Riesman, with a literally encyclopaedic knowledge of higher education sociology, is unique in this country, if not the world. John Gardner learned more about education, I suspect, by heading the 1964 White House Conference on Education, than after 11 years with the Carnegie Corporation. Frank Newman, a remarkably spright and vigorous critic of higher education, had occasion to take on this national focus with the help of two federal task forces on academic reform. He is now doing penance by having to run a state university, which is quite a different matter from being a national critic. Clark Kerr would never have gained the bird's eye knowledge of higher education at the University of California. It took a $6 million national commission to elevate him to a sufficiently high observation post to see the entire academic firmament. I know that critics have taken after the Carnegie Commission for not dealing with issues of learning content. While this is a debatable issue, given those particular circumstances, I would and have argued that the very existence of the Commission made possible the coming

together of varied talents, who could for once have sufficient time and sufficient reflection to look at American higher education as a whole.

Having said all that, I come to the matter of quality, and its maintenance in the face of innumerable threats to it, of which the scarcity of public funds is only one. I would not presume to prescribe to you a single formula, a particular break-through approach, to one of the fundamental questions which face you in education as others elsewhere around the country. I would wager that the same kind of central question is being asked -- or at least ought to be asked -- by our armed forces, by the United States Postal Service, by Amtrak, by various hospital corporations, by jurists, by our leading scientists, and, indeed, by anyone sufficiently interested in the quality of public services. It is an extraordinarily difficult question to answer. It entails issues relating to public morality, to social sensibilities, money, to citizens expectations, consumer demand, and even to definitions of language. What quality are we talking about? Intellectual quality? Qualities of human perceptions? Social sensitivities? Personal insights? Qualities of reason? Or commitment? Qualities of sheer heart and compassion?

Recently I spoke before a small inner city catholic college, which had just lost its accreditation. "Mr. Bonham," asked one department chairman, "how do we maintain quality in this institution and still stay alive?" Well, it was obvious that here was not a mini-Harvard. But perhaps its own sense of what qualities were worth preserving were more salient to the needs of that particular community. If that college could teach its students marketable skills, some social sophistication which spoke to the humanistic values of human life, for the respect of others, teach that attacking old people and raping helpless women in that

urban jungle were clearly beneath their own sense of dignity and was simply contemptuous -- if these matters could be taught and learned, did not this bring a quality of education to this community that was somehow at least as worthy as 700 SAT scores and being a shoo-in for Yale Law School? These are still the issues bound to the eternal questions of human worth. They need to be discussed in every state and every community where people still care about the improvement of haman life. (In this connection, I like very much the effort of the state education agency of Tennessee to develop a series of definitions of goals of quality, which it wishes both students and institutions of learning to reach out to. Not everyone will agree with their definitions. The effort is the important thing.)

All of these issues of maintaining quality in a period of leveling out is as old a question as America itself. Foreign observers such as DeTocqueville and Gunnar Myrdal have seen with particular acuteness this particular tension between our search for excellence and the need to equali: opportunities. We still tend to believe in general that one can be equal and superior at the same time, that the potential for human growth is only bounded by the given opportunity, and of course access thereto.

We are now in one of those periods where this sentiment towards equalizing the American dream through wider access to higher learning runs particularly strong. It was not always so. Thomas Jefferson, in his Notes on Virginia, made out a plan for elementary schooling, by which, he said, "twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually," and Jefferson returned several times to this theme of rigorous intellectual selection, notably in his "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge."

The American attitude towards intellectuality has always been ambiguous, to say the least. Were one to ask average Americans about the leading intellectual lights in this country, I doubt that they could name anyone beyond perhaps Margaret Mead and Eric Hoffer. So it is clearly not the kind of quality of excellence that lies just beneath the public consciousness. Jacques Barzun, in his The House of Intellect, puts this peculiarly American ambiguity this way: "Since it is seldom clear whether intellectual activity denotes a superior mode of being or a vital deficiency, opinion swings between considering Intellect a privilege and seeing it as a handicap. As a privilege it must be assailed, as a handicap it seems so easily remedied that it is scorned. In neither phase is the feeling whole and assured, for the attack and the derision alike testify to a quality tht gives no hold to the philanthropic impulse. This is why the 'egghead' and the 'grind' are not pitied like the physical cripple, even though all three are deemed miscarriages of nature. Intellect is thus simultaneously looked up to, resented, envied, and regarded with cold contempt."

So much, then, for the American view of intellect. The connective tissue between the celebration of the mind and academic quality is of course intimate and apparent to most people in academic life, or so it would at least appear. But no matter how we care to define those human qualities that serve both private and public ends, we have on the whole ignored one fundamental law of physics, which applies to national destinies as well: When you freely intermix the rich with the poor, high pressure with a vacuum vessel, high density with low density, concentrated color with clear liquid, what you end up with is something in between. In the sociological idium, those heretofore less fortunate are thus largely benefitting from that "something in between", while those once high in the saddle suffer a definite decline in the quality of whatever it is they are now engaged in.

I recently watched a television documentary on the rural health delivery system in Nigeria. The health minister was under great pressure from his few foreign-trained medical specialists to have the government pay for ever more costly medical research and laboratory equipment. Nigeria's handful elite of medical specialists all work in Lagos, and they were used to expect the best technology from their training in England and the United States. The health minister turned them all down. Not for ten years at least, he said, could he afford new electron microscopes and radiation equipment. The public investment was to be made in 250 new rural health clinics, primitive but effective, because, as he said, "we are going to divide what little we have among

all of our people, and not only those who can afford the high fees of Lagos specialists." For him, quality meant minimal health care for the millions, not maximal 20th century medicine for the few.

The dilemmas which you face in your daily planning are really not all that different, at least in principle. If you are going to have open access for virtually all high school graduates (and why not adult non-high schoolers?), you are not going to reach a per capita quality education in 100,000 students that you could have achieved for five thousand students twenty years ago. And neither the quality of that total education, nor the average quality of the now entering students, can be as high as it was two decades ago for the elite few. To say otherwise is not to face matters squarely. I have only one quarrel with the concept that mass and class are social ideals towards which one should constantly strive, even though their total fulfillment would seem unlikely, or in fact practically warranted.

My quarrel lies not with the evolving facts in the matter, but with an overbearing proclivity of public administrators to confuse statistical perfection for educational quality. We are now so encumbered by processes, management information systems, and efforts to perfect accountability, that we often forget that one ounce of social courage may very well be worth a pound of managerial know-how. When, last year, we published a major financial analysis on the fiscal state of higher education, no one thought of asking, including ourselves, how much this management of resources

had affected academic quality. To be sure, it is good news that colleges are now better balancing their budgets. That makes them heroes in the eyes of coordinating boards and legislatures and governors. But what, may I ask, has been given up? What is worth preserving, and what has been lost?

The dilemma also appears in other forms. There are a number of states with which I am personally acquainted, who used to maintain one first-rate flagship research university, and below that a healthy roster of two and four-year colleges. That flagship university was soon competing against an ambitious major state college turned state university, and then a third and a fourth. The race for equality was on, and it was perfectly agreeable to the political leaders, of course, and the subsequent leveling took its predictable course. What we now have in many states is a marshmellow system of academic institutions, none of them topflight and none of them very bad. Nobody after all is supposed to deserve better than anybody else. Thus, the state formula, pure and simple, of x-dollars for each equivalent full-time student has become a sturdy and politically attractive modus operandi.

The problem with all of this is that human talents do not follow these political sentiments. It is simply not in fact true that a state's investment in training a computer programmer for an associate of arts degree should be the same cost as that for a molecular physicist, a lawyer or an architect. And I ask myself this: If the political process were a little more logical than it is, would and should it not be argued that we can draw away a bit on our per student

investments in the lower reaches and add some incremental budgets in favor of one or two research universities, or specialized liberal arts schools, or other academic ventures in which the people of that state happen to have a particular interest?

One of the best of the state chancellors, who recently retired from one of the top state systems in the country, recently wrote me as follows:

> When my state decided to broaden the opportunity for higher education, it first established a community college system. The community colleges were basically an extension of high school. Teachers were required to be certified and were thereby equated with high school teachers as to salary. From other facts it was clear that unit costs of education were to be less than the unit cost of the university effort at the lower division. These differences constituted a clear case of differentiation based on an elitist concept. I differentiated between these institutions, both through a terminology of designating the two older universities as "graduate research centers" and establishing funding concepts which recognized the need for richer funding of the Centers. But pressures have eroded this concept, and the concept as to the equity and validity of this funding process were again opened. My impression is that once the question was opened, numbers became powerful and the two older institutions are in a minority in many ways. The democratic process resulted in a narrowing of the differentiation.... I remain puzzled why we insist upon winners and losers and rankings in the world of sports and then claim everyone is equal in intellectual activities. Those of us in education play a game of pretend and I would be something less than realistic to advocate that we abandon the rules of the game.... The extension of educational opportunity is a positive good and should not be retracted. My question is whether it cannot be delivered to some groups at a lower cost in order to restore the excellence in at least limited areas.
>
> I think that there you have it, in a nutshell.

Let me illustrate the dilemma of this issue in another way: We now know enough through research of the learning process and student environments, of what provides an optimum setting for learning. And yet, public agencies almost invariably ignore the evidence and act to the contrary. To illustrate: We know that, generally speaking, smaller and intimate learning settings are incrementally important in making the largest learning difference for a student. Yet, state planners, academic and political leaders, opt for larger and larger campus units. Research shows that private institutions on the whole represent better settings in terms of developing affective aspects of learning than public institutions. The trend is so obviously to the opposite. Research shows that residential colleges are far superior to commuting campuses in achieving significant changes in student behavior and socialization. And yet, underprivileged students, who would seem to benefit most from such influences, are less exposed to residential settings than those from the middle class.

And so it goes. The difficulties of relating educational research to public policy are well known and need no elaboration by me. But it does illustrate the seeming inability of political and semipolitical institution to look at the research evidence as a means for determining public policy. I have the highest respect for the extraordinary complexities of state government. State coordinating boards, I have always thought, find themselves in a particularly unfortunate never-never land. They stand between the executive

and legislative branches of government and academic institutions, but they have no political constituencies of their own, are damned for being in the pockets of the academics or in the pockets of the politicos. It must surely seem to many among you as a no-win situation.

And yet, I think there are beginning to be opportunities for a more creative transition from the application of managerialism in the last decade to higher education, to a concern over the next decade of how to best translate available dollars into maximal benefits, according to individual rather than institutional needs. How this is to be done is fortunately not in my province to say. But I think that here are some essential elements that must be preserved and better attended to in the future:

The first is the principle that the best kind of government is still minimal government. If you deprive imaginative academic institutions of their natural initiatives that spring forth from their own creative wellsprings, you will have in your states exactly what you deserve: marshmallow routinized education, as I call it.

Secondly, you must make a daily conscious effort to deal with <u>educational</u> substance, since, by the very definition of your function, success largely lies in dealing with what can be most easily measured, rather than what can not.

Thirdly, we shall arrive again in this country at the point where people will ask the qualitative questions about human accomplishments. They are already being asked in terms of levels of literacy. They will soon be asked in terms of other issues, such as private and public morality, and the

development of collaborative as opposed to competitive human beings. You will be asked to encourage human flexibility as well as human potential, human compassion as well as expert professionals, public morality instead of public brutality.

This country will have to turn some crucial corners within the lifetimes of your students. These coming years will only vaguely resemble the years past. The necessary social equilibrium will ultimately not be served by the public belief that every human is equal in talent to everybody else, that maintaining quality is best defined by dividing a nation's educational goods equally among all. Some players on the world stage are more equal than others, and we will need to identify the best and the brightest from every walk of life, from every station and every nook and cranny of our society. To maintain academic quality, you will need to energize your best resources, and develop a social philosophy which may not always be politically attractive or make front-page news, and to defend the notion that there is nothing immoral about identifying and rewarding exceptional talent. Above all, you must devise better ways to make the student the ultimate centerpiece of your work, and not the system and coordinating framework within which you must work. Your monthly statistics contain a thousand human tales, each different from the other. As a public servant, you should be responsive to these consumers who must be both your judge and beneficiary.

I have no doubt that your responsibilities will be more burdensome in the years ahead. But they could also be more creative, and more satisfying. You and your colleagues are largely responsible for one third of our national investment in higher learning. More of our national future depends on you than you have probably imagined. Democracy, untutored and unfettered, soon enough turns into a mob and anarchy. It will be that crucial margin of excellence that could make the difference. I think we are entering a new era of social balancing, and you will need all your wits about you to preserve what is best, along what is basic in a democratic setting.